

A history of the village of Binsey, Port Meadow and The Perch

The Perch, a 17th century thatched inn, is located in the ancient village of Binsey. Across the River Thames is Port Meadow, making the inn a peaceful retreat from the city.

The Medieval Period:

The pasture land, originally called Portmanait (or Burgess Island), was given to the Freemen of Oxford by King Alfred in return for fighting Danish invaders in the 10th century. To this day The Freemen of Oxford exercise their ancient rights to graze cattle and horses on the land and to fish in the river.

The English Civil War:

Port Meadow also has a military history. King Charles I billeted his forces there during the English Civil War, when Oxford temporarily became his headquarters. On 3 June 1644, the King slipped out of Oxford by night, marching north with 5000 men up the line of what is now Kingston Road, under the shadow of a tree-crowned gravel bank. They escaped along Aristotle Lane, to cross Port Meadow, ford the river, and make a dash for the West Country. This escape route will no doubt have crossed over the current location of The Perch.

The very first settlement in the vicinity of present-day Oxford would have been reached by crossing over fords of the River Thames. In certain areas the river was shallow enough for farmers to cross with their oxen. From this we can see where the name "Oxford" came from. There were three fords near Binsey, and these would have once been major routes into the settlement. It seems that the very fact that Oxford was surrounded by water deterred the Romans from ever settling here.

The Legend of Saint-Frideswide:

The village of Binsey itself features in the very foundations of Oxford and its University. According to legend, in the 7th century a daughter was born to the King of Mercia, King Didan and his wife, Sefrida.

His daughter was named Frideswide. She was raised by a holy woman, and she grew up to be deeply spiritual. However, news of her beauty spread, and her love was sought by Prince Algar. He decided to invade Oxford as a show of his affection, but our heroine fled from the city by boat to Binsey. It is said that there was an angel guiding the boat, and this very scene is portrayed in the stained glass window in Christ Church Cathedral.

It is likely that the mooring at Binsey is still the same as the present mooring, and the path to The Perch; an ancient pathway inland. Frideswide may well have trodden this very same path. At Binsey, Frideswide hid in the wilderness, finding shelter in a deserted hut once used to shelter pigs. She hid there for three years, connecting with Nature and developing her inner wisdom and healing skills.

Prince Algar was determined not to be beaten so easily and continued to try and find her hiding place. By the time she felt it safe to return to Oxford, he was absolutely fuming. Hearing of her return, Algar besieged the city and threatened to burn it to the ground unless Frideswide was handed over to him.

King Didan's defending army were worn out with fatigue, and it looked as if Frideswide would fall into Algar's hands. However, Frideswide found the courage and strength in her companion, the ox, to hold off defeat. She invoked the saints Catherine and Cecilia, who struck her persecutor blind the moment he broke through the city gates to enter Oxford. With their leader so wounded, Algar's fear-stricken men dispersed. Patriarchy had been defeated, and Oxford would be left in peace.

A truly humbled Prince Algar made his way to Binsey to find Frideswide. She took pity upon him, and a well sprang up at her feet. She wiped his eyes with the water and his sight was restored.

Alice in Wonderland:

The sacred well still exists, now in the graveyard of Binsey Church. It was known as a “treacle well”; the Medieval term for healing waters. This well also features in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland in the Mad Hatters Tea-Party scene, which tells of three girls who lived in a Treacle Well. Binsey also provided inspiration for Carroll’s Red Queen who was modelled on Alice’s governess, Mary Prickett, who lived in Church Farm next-door to Binsey Church.

The Perch is said to be the first place Lewis Carroll gave a reading of “Through the looking glass”.

A landmark in the making:

The origins of the Inn itself are not well-documented. However, an inn for humble travellers and agricultural workers would not likely have attracted much public attention. Boatmen bringing Cotswold wool to the area evidently used a building here, and it may well have been The Perch.

The separation of the Church and the pub is unusual, and is attributed to archeological evidence that there were earlier settlements between the two. Aerial photographs reveal marks of curved ditches in the fields between the two. However, distance never deterred the locals from visiting their pub, and the phrase “First the Church and then The Perch” became a local saying.

Writer Henry Taunt wrote that The Perch had been known as “The Cathedral” due to its landlord serving alcohol on a Sunday, in breach of licensing laws.

Modern days:

From 1928 through 1948, the Perch was hugely popular among Oxford University students as a venue to hear the latest Jazz. Although it ceased to be a jazz venue after 1949, in 2009 the Perch was named by the Brecon Jazz Festival as one of 12 venues which had made the most important contributions to jazz music in the United Kingdom.

The pub itself appeared to remain largely unchanged until a dramatic fire in 1977, which destroyed a large amount of the building. However, photographs show that it has been restored very much in keeping with its original form. The building is said to be haunted by the ghost of a heart-broken soldier who threw himself in the river (presumably in the area of the Thames known as Black Jacks Hole; a known suicide spot). His ghost returned to the Inn to forever drown his sorrows.

The Perch is forever re-writing its history. Learn more about the floods and Binsey, the fire of 2007 and the resulting disappearance of the soldier's ghost by joining our mailing list at www.the-perch.co.uk

“Just because two people fell in love...”

The Perch does Fairytale Weddings...